

ON CERTAIN DELIGHTS OF
THE BOOK OF DELIGHT
BY JOSEPH BEN MEIR IBN ZABARA:
AN EXAMINATION OF "THE TALE
OF THE EUNUCH AND THE
WISE DAUGHTER OF A COUNTRYMAN"¹

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1. Introduction

Israel Davidson's publication in 1914 of *Sepher Shaashuim: A Book of Mediaeval Lore by Joseph ben Meir ibn Zabara* granted students of Hebrew letters the best edition yet prepared of that long-neglected and singular medieval fiction, an edition based upon the only two sources known at that time and since—the Paris² and Constantinople³

1. In Davidson (1914, pp. 36–40). On the title of the tale see Section 1 and note 10.

2. Davidson (1914, p. LXXXIX, with incorporation of notes): "In 1865 the *Sepher Shaashuim* appeared from a manuscript in the Günzburg Library as a serial in a Hebrew periodical (*halṣḥānōn*, II, Paris, 1865, Nos. 12–22), and in the following year Senior Sachs contributed to the same periodical (III, Nos. 1–4) an introduction to Zabara's book and to two other publications which were afterwards issued together in one volume (*yēn laḥānōn*, Paris, 1866 . . .)."

3. A collection of books published at Constantinople in 1577 included Zabara's. On the identification of this corpus by Steinschneider, and on the differing versions of this edition,

manuscripts. Zabara's opus, among the earliest exempla of Hebrew rhymed prose narrative,⁴ comprises a frame story—that of a journey half imposed upon the author by a devil-in-thin-disguise; and fifteen included tales from varying sources, whose identification became the first primary focus of enquiry into the work. Davidson himself pointed out numerous Eastern analogues to the stories in his English introduction.⁵ Berger (1928–29) called attention to additional sources, Jewish and Eastern (non-Jewish) and Ta-Shma (1970) has illuminated aspects of the work's Jewish legal background. Sherwood⁶ noted numerous European parallels to the tales; and Ratzabi had disclosed Arabic sources of maxims and sententia.⁷ Other scholars have proffered suggestions for different readings or interpretations of words and phrases.⁸

Recently the work has begun to come under deserved scrutiny as a literary artifice. Dishon has considered different techniques of Zabara in incorporating Talmudic materials (1974) and has subjected to structural analysis three stories of a judge's wisdom (1976) and four misogynistic tales.⁹ In furtherance of this long-overdue appreciation of *Sepher Shaashuim* as narrative art, the writer here undertakes an analysis of a tale of two minds engaged in a skillful mutual test of wits; namely, "The Tale of the Eunuch and the Wise Daughter of a Countryman" or "Why Did the Ape Leap upon the Necks of the King's Wives?" as titled by Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, pp. 29–33).¹⁰ Three major subjects shall be addressed: the hidden sagacity of the eunuch and the girl; the relationship of the included tale to the frame narrative; and a comparison of Zabara's story to an Indian analogue. For clarity's and convenience's sake, Hadas' tasteful and accurate translation (1932)—including his

see Davidson (1914, pp. LXXXVIII–LXXXIX and notes thereto). For a brief comparison of the merits of the Paris and Constantinople mss. see pp. 508–510 of Abrahams (1894). In an expanded version of this article, Abrahams (1912) also treats of a possible source for the frame narrative in the legend of Solomon and Marcolf (pp. 21–26).

4. On the first Hebrew *maqāma*, *na'ūm 'āšēr ben yəhūdā* of Shelomo ibn Saqbel, see Schirmann (1956, Bk. I, Part 2, pp. 554–555; and Bk. II, part 1, p. 11). For a survey of *maqāma* literature in general, with brief incisive discussions of individual works, including *Sepher Shaashuim*, see Pagis (1976, pp. 199–244).

5. In a later edition—Berlin, 1925—the introduction is in Hebrew.

6. In his introduction to Hadas (1932).

7. See Plessner (1964) and Ratzabi (1970 and 1976).

8. See Baneth (1915), Abronin (1927), Berger (1928–29).

9. Announced as a future study in Dishon (1976). On Pagis' alaysis, see note 4, above.

10. In the original mss., tales were neither titled nor prefaced with summaries, nor was any division of the text into chapters or sections made. See Davidson (1914, p. XCI).

translation of Davidson's introductory summary—shall precede the analysis.¹¹

2. The Tale¹²

Zabara and Enan go upon their way, riding upon their asses. Enan relateth to Zabara the story of a certain king who dreamed a dream but knew not the interpretation thereof. He sent his eunuch to find an interpreter of dreams. The eunuch met a countryman who had a young daughter that understood dreams. She went with him to the king, explained his dream and became his wife.

And it came to pass after we had gone a furlong, each riding upon his ass, that Enan said to me: "Do thou carry me or I will carry thee; do thou lead me or I will lead thee." I said to him, "But thou art riding upon thine ass and I upon mine: how then may I carry thee or thou me? How can I lead thee or thou me?" "That," he replied, "is the story of the countryman and the king's eunuch."¹³ "And what, pray, was that story?" I asked. He said:

11. Hadas (1932, pp. 71–76). The adequate rationale for the style of Hadas' translation is presented by Sherwood in his introduction (Hadas, 1932, p. 41): "The pseudo-Elizabethan English employed in the translation was chosen because it seemed best suited to the peculiar character of the Hebrew texts, which are full of Scriptural echoes and are most appropriately rendered by the language of the authorized version of the Bible."

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13. That the more specific meaning of *sārīs*—eunuch, rather than steward—is here intended, seems very likely. Firstly, in medieval usage of the term, the former meaning is most often intended: see Ben-Yehuda (1960, s.v.). Secondly, there is, early in the tale, a clear allusion to Esth 1:10, where the word *sārīsīm* unquestionably denotes eunuchs: "vayyaškēm babbōqer vayyābō ləpānāv 'ehād missārīsāv hārō'im 'et pānāv (Davidson, 1914, p. 36, ll. 11–12; Schirmann, 1956, Bk. II, Part 1, p. 29, ll. 11–12)"—"He arose in the morning, and one of his eunuchs, a personal attendant, came before him" (Hadas, 1932, p. 71). Added weight must be given the testimony of this allusion inasmuch as at the story's conclusion, a ten-word quote from the Book of Esther, divided among separate sentences, draws a clear analogy between Ahasuerus' choosing his new queen, and the monarch of Zabara's tale choosing the countryman's daughter (Davidson, 1914, p. 40, ll. 87–88, 98–99; Schirmann, 1956, Bk. II, Part 1, p. 33, ll. 100–101, 113; Hadas, 1932, pp. 75–76—quoting Esth 2:9, 17: "vattiṭaḥ hanna'ārā bō'ēnāv . . . vattisā hēn vāhesed ləpānāv . . . vayyāsem keter malkūy bārōšāh" ["and the maiden pleased him . . . and she obtained grace and favor in his sight . . . so that he set the royal crown upon her head"]). Finally, later in the tale, before the king's servant reveals himself as such, he is referred to by the maiden not only as a *sār* ("prince" or "nobleman") but as a *sārīs* (Davidson, 1914, p. 38, line 50; Schirmann, 1956, Bk. II, Part 1, p. 31, line 57; Hadas, 1932, p. 73)—and the recognition of a eunuch by obvious signs, such as being beardless, is not only plausible but is mentioned in a medieval Hebrew source (see Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Ishut*, II, cited in Ben-Yehuda, 1960, s.v.).

"There was once a king, exceeding great both as king and as sage, and he had many wives and concubines. One night he dreamt that he saw an ape of Yemen leap up and spring upon the necks of his wives and concubines. In the morning his spirit troubled him, and his strength was gone from him and he said in his heart, 'Surely this can only be the king of Yemen, who will drive me from my kingdom and lie upon my bed with my wives and my concubines.'

"He arose in the morning, and one of his eunuchs, a personal attendant, came before him, and perceived that he was sorrowful and anxious, that his heart was ill at ease and troubled within him. The eunuch spake, 'Wherefore art thou sad, my lord the king, wherefore hast thou plucked the head of our joy? Reveal thy secret to thy servant, the son of thy hand-maiden; perhaps I may avail to remove thy sorrow from thy heart.' The king replied, 'I have dreamed a dream, wherein I have tasted of the bitterness of death. Knowest thou of a man understanding and wise in the interpretation of dreams in these lands?' He replied, 'I have heard that one of the sages, who doth dwell at a distance of three days' journey, is wise and understanding and pure, that he knoweth the meaning of all things, and more, that he can interpret dreams however deep and obscure.¹⁴ Do thou but relate thy dream, and I will go to him.' So the king related his dream and said, 'Go in peace.'

"The eunuch then went down to his house, and mounted his mule and set the interpreter's house as his goal. And it came to pass in the morning that he met a certain countryman who was riding upon an ass. The eunuch hailed him, 'Peace to thee, thou worker of earth, who art thyself earth and yet eat earth.' The countryman laughed at his words. 'Whither goest thou?' asked the eunuch. 'To my house,' the countryman replied. Then the old eunuch said, 'Carry thou me or I will carry thee.' The countryman replied, 'But, my lord, how may I carry thee when thou ridest upon thy mule and I ride upon my beast?' They proceeded another furlong and saw a certain field full of wheat. The countryman said, 'How goodly is this field; surely its sheaves are fitly set.' The eunuch replied, 'If its wheat be not already eaten.' They went yet a little distance more and they saw a tower, lofty and strongly fortified; it was well built and stood upon a rock. The countryman said, 'See this high tower, how comely it is and how well fortified.' The eunuch replied, 'It is indeed fortified without, if it be not destroyed within.' The eunuch remarked, 'There is

14. In this one instance, Hadas' version parallels the rhyme construct of the Hebrew.

snow on the height.' The countryman laughed, for it was the month of Tamuz and there was no snow anywhere in the world.

"They went on and came to a road with wheat on the one side and on the other. The eunuch said, 'Upon this road there passed a horse, blind in one eye, and as for his burden, it was oil upon the one side and vinegar upon the other.' They went on and were approaching a city when they saw a corpse being accompanied to its burial. The eunuch asked, 'Is this old man dead or is he alive?' The countryman said in his heart, 'How can this person in his figure seem to be one of the wise, when he is in truth the greatest of fools?'

"When the day was turning to evening the eunuch inquired, 'Is there a place to lodge nearby?' The countryman replied, 'Lo, there is a village before us, where is my house and my place. Do me the honor, prithee, of coming to my house; I have both straw and provender.' The eunuch replied, 'I grant thy request to do as is good in thy sight, and do come into thy house as is thy petition.' So he came into his house and ate and drank and fed his mule, and laid him upon his bed. The countryman laid him down also, and his wife and two daughters were before him.

"And it came to pass at midnight that he roused him from his slumbers and spake to his wife and daughters: 'How great a fool is this man who hath come to our house this night! He met me upon the way, and all day he wearied me with his words and vexed me with his sayings.' Said his wife, 'What didst thou perceive of his folly?' He told her of the 'carry thou me or I will carry thee,' of the wheat field, the tower, the snow, the road, the corpse, and of his greeting him as one who ate the earth. Now the countryman thought that the eunuch was asleep—but he was awake, with his heart growing ever more tempestuous.¹⁵

"His youngest daughter spoke up and said, being but a lass of fifteen years, 'In truth, father, the man is wise and understanding. 'Tis thou hast failed to attend to him properly. Thou didst not understand the sense of his words, for that his speech was spoken in wisdom and his saying in knowledge and understanding. As for the eunuch's speaking of a worker of earth and eater of earth, he meant to signify that all that man eateth cometh forth from the earth. Thou art thyself truly earth, for dust thou art and to dust returnest. As for "carry thou me or I thee," his meaning was that everyone that goeth upon the way with his neighbor and relateth

15. This sentence is my translation. Hadas translates here (improperly), "The countryman's heart waxed bolder as he spake, for he thought that the eunuch lay asleep all the while he was himself wakeful."

sayings and stories, and cites puzzles and proverbs, doth thereby carry his neighbor and lead him on, and relieve him of the weariness of the journey and remove him from troubling thoughts. As for the wheat field, he spake truth, for the owner thereof may be poor, and have received the price of the grain in advance, or mayhap he hath borrowed on the security of the grain ere it be harvested. Regarding the tower he also spake truth, for any house which hath not in it grain and bread and viands, that house is destroyed from within and shelters only fear of starvation. When he said, "There is snow upon the height," he meant, "Thy beard is white." Thou shouldst have replied, "Aye, the season hath brought it about." Regarding the horse which was blind in one of his eyes, he may have perceived it from the fact that the grass of the one field was eaten, whereas that of the other was untouched. As for the oil and vinegar, he observed that the vinegar had dried the sand and the oil had not. His question on the corpse was also correct, for if the deceased left a son behind him, he is in truth alive; if not, he is dead.'

"When morning broke the maiden said to her father, 'Ere this stranger depart, do thou set before him what food I give thee.' Thereupon she gave him thirty eggs and a bowl of milk and a whole loaf and said to him, 'Go and inquire of the stranger how many days be wanting of the month, and whether the moon be full, and whether the sun be whole.' The old man went and first ate two of the eggs and a little of the bread, and drank some of the milk; the remainder he gave to the stranger and asked of all the matters which his daughter had bidden. The stranger replied and said, 'Tell thy daughter that the sun is not whole, neither is the moon full, and the month wants two days.' The countryman laughed and said to his daughter, 'Did I not tell thee that this gentleman is simple? For we are at mid-month, and he says but two days are wanting.' 'Father,' said the maid, 'hast thou eaten somewhat of the things I gave thee?' The countryman said, 'I have eaten two of the eggs and a little bread, and I have drunk some of the milk.' 'Now,' said the maid, 'do I know of a surety that the man is truly wise and understanding.'

"When the eunuch heard of the maiden, that her conjectures failed not by the breadth of a hair, he marveled at her wisdom and was amazed. He arose while it was yet morning and delayed not, and said to the father, 'I would have speech with thy daughter, that spoke to thee in the night.' The countryman consented and stood his younger daughter before the stranger. The eunuch spoke with the maiden, and questioned her and examined her, and found her wise and of sound sense in all her speech. He

declared his purpose unto her and the matter of the king and his dream. When she heard the account of the dream she said, 'I shall declare the interpretation thereof to the king, if I should see him, but to no man else will I reveal it.' Then the eunuch petitioned the maiden's father and mother to permit her to go with him, for by her going his honor and glory would be increased. He made it known that he was the king's eunuch and intent on the king's business. The countryman feared the king, for that he was his lord, and said, 'Let my lord do as is good in his sight.'

"Then the maiden accompanied him, and he brought her before the king, and related all that had befallen him, and that the maiden would declare the meaning of the king's dream if she but saw him on the throne of his glory. Then the king saw the maiden and she pleased him exceedingly and found grace and favor in his sight. He brought her into a chamber and spoke with her privily and related his dream. She said, 'Fear not, my lord king, all that hath passed in thy dream, for peace is thine and no evil is portended; yet am I abashed from declaring the interpretation, lest I reveal to the king his shame.' He replied, 'Wherefore shouldst thou be ashamed to declare the interpretation of my dream, seeing no man is with me?' She answered, 'My lord king, search among thy wives and maidservants and concubines, and thou wilt find amongst them a man clothed in their habit. He doth come in unto them and lie with them, and he is the ape whom thou sawest leaping upon their necks in thy dream.' So the king searched among his wives and concubines and found among them a handsome youth, comely in form and features, from his shoulder and upwards taller than the crowd; before his countenance gold or silver would be dimmed. The king seized him and butchered him before their eyes and cast his blood in their faces; thereafter he slew them all. And he took the maiden to wife and put the crown royal upon her head, and vowed a vow that never as long as she lived would another woman lie in his bosom, but she alone would be his portion and his lot."

3. Riddles and Hidden Sagacity

One achievement of Zabara in "The Tale of the Eunuch" is his ability to arouse reader curiosity in a variety of ways. Firstly, outright conundrums are presented, these being the chain of the eunuch's questions; the girl's counter-questions; and, not to be disregarded, the prefatory "baiting puzzle" Enan lays before his traveling companion, "Do thou

carry me or I will carry thee; do thou lead me or I will lead thee"—a remark mirrored in Enan's tale in an exchange between the eunuch and the peasant.

Secondly, there is deferred satisfaction of reader curiosity: Enan's explanation to the narrator, Joseph ibn Zabara himself, of the meaning of "Do thou carry me or I will carry thee. . ." is long a-coming, and the un-ciphering of both the eunuch's and the girl's veiled communications wait upon the transmission of the puzzled peasant. Finally, the meaning of the dream itself is not given outright until the end of the tale.

However, while reader curiosity is piqued, it is not always satisfied; and these instances seem to detract from the narrative. Certain expectations are not fulfilled: the eunuch never does take the three-day journey he announced to the king at the outset; nor does he meet with, or bring back, the wise man he described. Another problematic aspect of this tale is the seeming arbitrariness of some of the incidents and dialogue. The eunuch's leisurely journeying and verbal sallies with the peasant hardly seem appropriate to one charged with so important a mission as his, and his questions and peculiar observations appear random, rather than determined by any needs of the tale; and the same can be posited of the girl's "calendrical" riddle. However, attention to precisely these problematic points can shed light on a major component of the story's "delight"—its interplay of wit and its balanced design.

It may be noticed that the girl's testing of the eunuch parallels the latter's probing of her sagacity in more ways than one: the girl presents her puzzle through a naive and unknowing medium, her own father—as did the eunuch. Moreover, the girl's and the eunuch's strategies are both contingent upon behavior on the farmer's part anticipated and/or provoked by the testers: the eunuch apparently anticipates the farmer's airing his (the eunuch's) strange remarks—else his continuance of his odd observations to an ignorant and unresponsive peasant would be fruitless; and the girl anticipates her father's eating from the food she has prepared for the guest.¹⁶ Too, the father is convinced, through the eunuch's reply to his daughter, of the former's stupidity—mirroring his reaction to the eunuch's talk with him on the road. Finally, in basing her test on the decreasing of provisions, the girl partially echoes one observation that

16. The girl specifically asks, "*kammā yāmīn ḥasārū min ḥabōdes*" (Davidson, 1914, p. 39, l. 66; Schirrmann, 1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 32, l. 76)—"How many days *be wanting* of the month?" (Hadas, 1932, p. 74; my emphasis—D. S.)

the eunuch made; namely, that a wheat field, to all appearances full, might have somehow been eaten already. At the same time she echoes another of the eunuch's puzzling remarks as interpreted by her:

Regarding the tower he also spake truth, for any house which hath not in it grain and bread and viands, that house is destroyed from within and shelters only fear of starvation.¹⁷

Small wonder that the old eunuch was impressed with this singular fifteen-year-old who, intellectually, seemed to project a mirror image of himself. And there could well be a deeper motive for his enthusiasm: his realization or strong suspicion that she had penetrated to a second level of meaning of his conundrums; namely, the state of affairs at the palace—for a goodly segment of the eunuch's remarks to the peasant seem to refer to that situation, as does the maiden's counter-riddle.

To the farmer's eye, the field of wheat is untouched, yet the eunuch posits it may already be eaten of—a likely reference to the violation of the king's harem; and the same symbolism is suggested by the tower, fair without but eaten from within. The half blind horse could well refer to the king, whose perception of his predicament is at once close to correct, yet seriously flawed. Finally, the last riddle, "Is this old man dead or is he alive," referring to progeny could, in the context of this tale, refer to the continuation of the royal line; if so, it could comprise a covert hint to the maiden as to the wifely role she could—and indeed does in the end—assume.¹⁸

In light of the above analysis of the eunuch's remarks, his "failure" to seek out the wise, male dream interpreter requested by the king and spoken of by him is rendered explicable: he himself is the wise dream interpreter. Common sense, prudence, court *savoir-faire*—all would preclude his revealing to his ruler a situation that he, the eunuch, in some fashion could have been responsible for not observing and righting. Moreover, the phrasing of the king's request—a king described as among the wisest of monarchs¹⁹—gives no hint whatever of the monarch's even

17. Davidson (1914, p. 39, ll. 56–57); Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 31, l. 65–p. 32, l. 66); Hadas (1932, p. 74).

18. While it is tempting to relate the riddle of snow on the hill to the King's aging and so to the urgency of his swiftly bearing new (and untainted) progeny, the text does not hint at an advanced age for the monarch.

19. Davidson (1914, p. 36, l. 7); Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 29, l. 6); Hadas (1932, p. 71).

considering the possibility of the eunuch's possessing the requisite knowledge.²⁰

Finally the author all but openly identifies the eunuch as the wise interpreter, through having the peasant girl respectfully observe twice that their guest was "wise and understanding (*hākām vānāḥōn*)."²¹

Precisely this phrase had been included in the eunuch's description of the hypothetical dream interpreter "three days' journey from the palace:

I have heard that one of the sages, who doth dwell at a distance of three days' journey, is *wise and understanding* (*hākām vānāḥōn*) and pure, that he knoweth the meaning of all things, and more, that he can interpret dreams however deep and obscure.²²

If, then, the eunuch is seen to be himself the dream interpreter he seeks, his actions can be readily construed as part of an involved stratagem: quite unwilling—properly so—to openly describe the king's predicament, his communication to the maiden, through her father, is perforce extremely veiled. His discretion is copied by the girl, who limits her verbal interpretation to the more general and safe level of his riddles' meaning. Moreover, she mirrors his method by utilizing the givens of country life (eggs, bread and milk—like the wheat field, for example) for symbolic communication.

20. A maxim brought in later in the book is germane here: "They said to a certain sage, 'The king loveth thee not.' Quoth he, 'The king cannot love one greater than he.'" (Davidson, 1914, p. 71, ll. 104–105—my translation); Hadas (1932, p. 104) translates, "'Then,' quoth he, 'the king loveth not one who is greater than he.'"

21. Davidson (1914, p. 38, l. 48 and p. 39, l. 74); Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 31, l. 55 and p. 32, l. 85); Hadas (1932, pp. 73 and 74).

22. This follows essentially the Paris ms.; the Constantinople ms. (C), incomplete for this tale, here has "*hū yōdēd' vāhākām līptōr pešer dāḥār*" ("he is knowing and wise, interpreting the meaning of all things"); the maiden's praise of the eunuch and a good section of her explanation of the eunuch's remarks to her father are absent in C. See Davidson (1914, p. 39). For further emphasis on the motif of wisdom in the tale cf.:

- (1) Davidson (1914, p. 37, l. 17); Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 30, l. 16); Hadas (1932, p. 71).
- (2) Davidson (1914, p. 37, l. 35–p. 38, l. 36); Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 30, l. 40–p. 31, l. 41); Hadas (1932, p. 72).
- (3) Davidson (1914, p. 38, ll. 48–49); Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 31, ll. 56–57); Hadas (1932, p. 73).
- (4) Davidson (1914, p. 39, l. 76); Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 32, l. 87); Hadas (1932, p. 74).
- (5) Davidson (1914, p. 40, ll. 78–79); Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 33, ll. 90–91); Hadas (1932, p. 75).

Only after having been given these indications of extraordinary acumen does the eunuch openly reveal to the girl the nature of his mission. It is noteworthy that the eunuch is not represented as communicating the dream's interpretation to the maiden—whether because he has concluded that her response to his riddles already evidences adequate comprehension of the dream's interpretation, or because he feels that she is brilliant enough generally to unriddle the dream, or a combination of both.

The girl, on the other hand, in her unwillingness to tell the dream's interpretation to any but the king alone firstly furthers her own self interest—that the tale's ending proves; but she does more: she evidences further sophistication and receptivity to the eunuch's indirect hints. Her egg-bread-milk gambit has given witness—appropriately discreet and veiled in this situation—to her comprehension, to at least some degree, of the second-level covert meaning of the eunuch. Hence she would know, after the eunuch's revelation of his mission and the dream's contents, that he himself was aware of the dream's meaning; and she would readily appreciate the pains he had gone to, not to admit that knowledge openly to the king or even her. Hence, without being explicitly asked to do so, she guards the eunuch's interest even as she serves her own: he will still be able to disclaim any knowledge of the seamy and embarrassing predicament of the king.²³ Finally and conversely, her "favor" to the eunuch is not entirely lacking in additional self-interest: she is at this point very dependent upon the eunuch for the advancement of her own designs.

This ongoing balance of wit testing, and display of sophistication and *savoir-faire* between the two major protagonists of this tale, seems to give still further meaning to the riddle of "Carry thou me or I will carry thee" and the maiden's explication thereof:

... that everyone that goeth upon the way with his neighbor and relateth sayings and stories and cites puzzles and proverbs doth thereby carry his neighbor and *lead him* on and relieve him of the weariness of the journey and *remove him from troubling thoughts*. (my emphasis—D. S.)²⁴

23. Cf. the maiden's explicit fear, later, of confronting the king with his disgrace: "Yet am I abashed from declaring the interpretation, lest I reveal to the king his shame" (Davidson, 1914, p. 40, l. 90; Schirrmann, 1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 31, l. 104; Hadas, 1932, p. 75).

24. Davidson (1914, p. 38, ll. 52–54); Schirrmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 31, ll. 60–63); Hadas (1932, p. 73).

The eunuch's bold challenge to the farmer—echoing Enan's to Joseph²⁵—implies at once that a choice is to be made as to which of the two conversants shall take the initiative and leadership; and the interchange between the eunuch and the peasant girl, too, is characterized by a shifting back and forth of initiative and leadership. Secondly, the riddle put forward by the girl, displaying her deeper sagacity, certainly does much to rid the eunuch of any troubling thoughts that he might have regarding the resolution of his own predicament.

This brings the discussion back full circuit to a problem cited earlier and still unresolved: the seemingly too contrived nature of the eunuch's good fortune in finding an interpreter who would personally convey the interpretation to the king, leaving the eunuch innocent of knowledge that the king might want concealed—not to mention the added good fortune of her being one who would immediately replace the tainted wives. Now there is, of course, the possibility that Ibn Zabara's tale is flawed here by too many contrivances; and a flaw it must be considered, for however much more contrived the turns of plot in analagous tales—and particularly the Indian analogue to be discussed later—there is simply too much careful structuring in this story as retold by Zabara to allow for facile dismissal of the problematics of improbability.

A possible explanation of the eunuch's "good fortune" exists; namely, a quasi-prophetic prescience on his part. There is some basis in the tale for positing such a talent—mainly, a number of verbal allusions to the Joseph story. The report of the king's agitation—"vayāhī ḥabbōqer vattippa'ēm rūḥō (In the morning his spirit troubled him)" (Davidson, 1914, p. 36, l.9)²⁶ is an exact quote of Gen 41:8, wherein Pharaoh's perturbation is recorded; the king, in telling the eunuch "ḥālōm ḥālamtī (I have dreamed a dream)" (Davidson, 1914, p. 37, l.15),²⁷ quotes Pharaoh's words to his advisors (Gen 41:15); the eunuch's description of the alleged dream interpreter as one who "can interpret dreams however deep and obscure (*kol ḥālōm 'āmōq vāsāfūm pōfēr*) echoes Pharaoh's remark to Joseph (Gen 41:15): "... thou canst understand a dream to interpret it (*tišma' ḥālōm liptōr 'ōfō*)."

Finally, Joseph's calling for the appointment of a man "*nāḥōn vāḥākām* (understanding and wise)" over Egypt (Gen 41:33) and

25. To differentiate between ibn Zabara, author of *Sepher Shaashuim*, and ibn Zabara as protagonist, his latter identity shall be herein indicated by "Joseph"—his first name.

26. Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 29, ll. 8–9); Hadas (1932, p. 70).

27. Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 29, l. 15); Hadas (1932, p. 70).

Pharaoh's designation of him as such a man (Gen 41:39) is variously echoed in the Ibn Zabara story: in the king's query concerning "a man understanding and wise (*nāḥōn vāḥākām*)" (Davidson, 1914, p. 37, l.16)²⁸; in the eunuch's reply concerning a sage "wise and understanding" (Davidson, 1914, p. 37, l.17)²⁹; and in the maiden's observing twice that the eunuch is "wise and understanding" (Davidson, 1914, p. 38, l.48; p. 39, l.74).³⁰

The eunuch is thus linked to the divinely favored dream interpreter. Relatedly, his "inexplicably" knowing to come to the right address is paralleled by the girl's knowing the proper order of the eunuch's remarks, which she explains in their exact sequence despite their having been told her in a slightly different sequence by her father. Indeed Zabara might here be hinting that both protagonists possess unusual faculties.³¹

Whether or not this be granted, or whether or not the eunuch's good fortune be held a flaw, "The Tale of the Eunuch and the Wise Daughter of a Countryman" recommends itself for a variety of techniques for winning and holding reader interest; and for a scheme that is complex, balanced and covert, of mutual testing of wits, leading to the resolution of the problem that engendered the very narrative itself.

4. The Function of the Tale in the Frame Narrative

A. The Local Context

The most apparent point of commonality between the frame narrative and the included tale is the riddle "Carry thou me or I will carry thee"; the perplexing of the persons addressed (Joseph and the peasant); and the

28. Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 30, l. 16); Hadas (1932, p. 70).

29. Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 30, l. 18); Hadas (1932, p. 71).

30. Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 31, l. 55 and p. 32, l. 85); Hadas (1932, pp. 73 and 74).

31. The daughter correctly gives the sequence of the eunuch's observations as eater-of-earth, carry-thou-me, wheat field, tower, snow on the hill, horse, dead man; in the farmer's version the eater of earth is mentioned last (Davidson, 1914, p. 38, ll. 45–46; Schirmann, 1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 31, l. 52; Hadas, 1932, p. 73). While Hadas translates the last item as "... and of his greeting him as one who ate the earth," the Hebrew simply reads *vā'inyan mā'ākal hā'ādāmā* (the matter of the earth food). Even if one were to assume that the farmer made it perfectly clear that the last-mentioned matter came first in the conversation, the fact of his daughter's choosing to follow the eunuch's exact order, rather than her father's, remains significant.

delay/frustration said persons have to experience before the resolution of their confusion by another party.

Enan, through the timing and delivery of his provocative riddle-challenge, first teases from Joseph a question (" . . . How can I carry thee or thou me . . . "), whose answer ("That is the story . . . ") leads to the tale that Enan had ready.³² This ploy then, if a common device for bringing stories into a frame narrative,³³ does show Enan as manipulating Joseph.

On the other hand, the juxtaposition of the two sets of characters (Enan—Joseph, eunuch—peasant), mouthing much the same words, leaves Enan identified with the adroit eunuch and Joseph with the dullard peasant; and dullard is the word: even after his daughter has demonstrated in detail the wisdom of the man, the farmer's quick response to the next enigmatic statement of the eunuch on the days of the month is, "Did I not tell thee that this gentleman is simple?"³⁴

Yet another indication of the peasant's obtuseness is his lacking any sense that his daughter, in presenting thirty (!) eggs to their guest is engaged in anything uncommon.

By identifying Joseph with the countryman, then, Enan is implicitly insulting Joseph. A juxtaposition of this tale with the preceding portion of the book—both the narrative frame and the included tales—amply substantiates this abrasive thrust of the Enan recitation.

Joseph, at the book's outset, first encounters Enan as an awesome figure in a dream, proffering viands and wine, and awakens to that very reality.³⁵ Urged upon by Enan to undertake a long journey, Joseph pleads reluctance, partially on the grounds of Enan's threatening physiognomy—a recognized index of character in the medieval world.³⁶ To illustrate his suspicion that Enan means to lead him astray he recites a rather involved tale of a fox who beguiles a leopard into moving to a dangerous valley. Within this story, the leopard's wife tells her husband a tale of fox treachery, to which the fox counters with four misogynistic

32. Davidson (1914, p. 36, ll. 1–6); Schirmann (1956, Bk II, Part 1, p. 29, ll. 1–5; Hadas (1932, p. 71).

33. Cf. the following instances in ben Sahula's *māṣāl haqqadmonī*: p. 49, ll. 11–12; p. 152, ll. 20–21; p. 157, ll. 11–12. See also Epstein (1967, p. 91, note 3).

34. Davidson (1914, p. 39, l. 70); Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part 1, p. 32, l. 81); Hadas (1932, p. 74).

35. Davidson (1914, p. 7, l. 8–p. 8, l. 22; pp. 47–48).

36. Davidson (1914, p. 17, l. 36–p. 20, l. 66); Hadas (1932, pp. 54–55); and see "physiognomy" in Davidson's introduction, pp. LXXXII–LXXXVI and notes thereto.

tales of his own, each grislier than the preceding, and all finally convincing the leopard to disbelieve his wife and accept the fox's counsel. Consequently the leopard removes to a new location and meets his death there in a flood.³⁷

In sum: Joseph, at the book's outset, describes Enan, in a series of tales, as a malevolent and cunning fox—a portraiture to which Enan angrily takes exception:

... hast thou named me fox and thyself leopard? Thinkest thou that I am affrighted of thee as was the fox of the leopard? Thinkest thou that I blinded thine eyes when I spake unto thine ears? Truly hath the sage said, "In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin." . . . Cease then from words of jest and mockery, for they are vanity, deeds of folly.³⁸

Seen against this background, Enan's tale comprises a double insult: whereas Joseph had represented himself as a confused figure (the leopard) incapable of seeing the truth as presented by his own knowledgeable female kin (the leopard's wife), Enan, through the "Carry thou me or I will carry thee" ploy, identifies Joseph with a character even more obtuse—a peasant who, after having been shown by his daughter the sagacity of their guest, can still hold that guest a simpleton, because the latter's difficult remarks are beyond his comprehension.

Secondly, Enan reverses his own portraiture at Joseph's hand: whereas Joseph had cast Enan as one whose cunning led to the execution of a preconceived evil plan bringing ruin to an innocent and unsuspecting party, Enan's eunuch is a character whose cunning leads to the execution of a beneficent plan, partially (perhaps wholly) preconceived (following the monarch's recital of his dream and his request), a plan that serves justice and the rightful interest of another—the king.

Countering Joseph's portraiture of the fox (Enan) as a misogynist, Enan gives a picture of a eunuch who has no such outlook. To the contrary, while agreeing to the king's request to seek out a wise man, he proceeds to locate a woman whose wisdom is extraordinary, even superior to her husband's-to-be.

In yet another fashion Enan denigrates his traveling companion:

37. Davidson (1914, p. 20, l. 74—p. 34, l. 362); Hadas (1932, pp. 55–69). Some of this material is contained in Schirmann (1956, Bk II, Part 1, pp. 17–26).

38. Davidson (1914, p. 34, ll. 363–369); Hadas (1932, pp. 69–70).

Joseph, in the third of his fox-told-tales,³⁹ had presented a figure who could predict human behavior and could manipulate people to his end; namely, a king out to discredit female fidelity. That smug monarch had called in a husband and his allegedly virtuous wife separately, promising each a rich reward for the slaying of the other spouse; the husband's refusal and the wife's cooperation substantiated the king's prior claim that

never hath there been seen or reported a woman who was good and virtuous, endowed with understanding and knowledge.⁴⁰

In contrast to the above tale, Enan presents *two* manipulative, knowledgeable figures—the eunuch and the girl; and while in Joseph's tale the king's commands and request to the couple are evil on their face, the eunuch's requests are morally unblemished, as is the maiden's conduct.⁴¹

In another contrast, the whole thrust of Joseph's tale had been to highlight the uselessness and folly of leaving one's home to travel; while in Enan's tale, leavetaking from home, if temporary, is shown to lead to exemplary results.

Finally, attention to the immediately ensuing episode in the narrative reveals that Enan's "Carry thou me or I will carry thee" was indeed a slight and perceived as such by Joseph. After a night of hunger, where Enan denies food to his famished guest and the latter's starved donkey, Joseph jibes:

Meseemeth tomorrow will we be reduced to that which thou hast spoken, "Carry thou me or I will carry thee," for if the asses eat no fodder this night they shall in no wise be able to go on the morrow.⁴²

B. The Tale of the Eunuch Related to *Sepher Shaashuim* as a Whole

Two themes of the "Tale of the Eunuch" are central to *Sepher*

39. Davidson (1914, p. 26, l. 200–p. 30, l. 289); Hadas (1932, pp. 61–66).

40. Davidson (1914, p. 26, ll. 203–204); Hadas (1932, p. 62).

41. Another indication that Enan's portraiture of the eunuch comes to counter the fox's description of the king in the third tale of Joseph is the immediate description of that monarch as "*hākām vənāḥōn* (understanding and wise)" (Davidson, 1914, p. 26, l. 200; Hadas, 1932, p. 61)—the words Enan uses to describe the eunuch. See notes 21, 22.

42. Davidson (1914, p. 43, ll. 32–34); Hadas (1932, p. 78).

Shaashuim, these being wisdom and deceptive appearances; and the two are intertwined in the book even as they are bound up with each other in the included tale.

To summarize the book briefly: Joseph, the first person narrator, dreaming of a divine-like creature, awakes to find Enan, who provides him with a delicious repast. At Enan's invitation to journey with him, Joseph expresses reservations over the ominous looks of his companion, and expresses his fear that the latter might lead him astray, with a series of tales (mentioned heretofore) revolving about a fox and a leopard. Persuaded nonetheless by his aggressive associate, Joseph does set out.

After hearing the "Tale of the Eunuch" en route, Joseph encounters, at their first stop at an inn, Enan's niggardliness: Joseph and his mule are given nothing to assuage their hunger. Next, en route, Enan pauses to weep at a town where a deceased friend of his, a wise judge, resided, and tells three tales of the judge's acumen; in all three the judge is the salvation of innocent persons robbed of possessions or more by fraudulent evildoers who have variously masked their crimes or identities. At their next stopover in the city of Tob they are hosted by a kindly man who recounts a tale of the saintly Tobit and a story of piety wherein a highly respected man is revealed, after his death, as a sinning heretic; and a man ill-regarded is discovered to have been one who had revered his aged father scrupulously.

At the next town their host, a friend of Enan's, feeds them and then regales them with Arab adages.

Next Enan's city is reached, where neither copious arguments on Enan's part nor two tales can thwart Joseph's resolve to eat: he gorges himself on Enan's fare boldly, disregarding all the latter's protestations. Enan, vexed and bent on depriving his guest of sleep, barrages Joseph with questions anatomical, medical and other, which Joseph takes in stride. He in turn inundates Enan with questions which the latter—despite open boasts of great learnedness—cannot cope with at all. On the next day, following an altercation with Enan, the latter, enraged, reveals himself as a devil. At Joseph's terror Enan swears that he will do him no harm. After a stay in Enan's city, whose inhabitants are shown to be fools and evil men all, Enan announces his intent to marry. In the ensuing discussion Joseph urges him to choose a wise wife, and in reply, Enan, to exemplify his fear of a bad wife, tells the last story in the book, that of a washerwoman who excelled a devil in her machinations. The book ends with Enan wedding an apparently virtuous and beautiful woman,

through Joseph's good services, and Joseph asking leave to return to the city of the noble Sheshet Beneveniste.

Even so brief a summary as the above can serve to point up the centrality and interweaving of the themes of wisdom and deceptive appearances in this work, and certain ironies attaching thereto. At first depicted as divine-like in Joseph's dream and then lavishly generous, Enan is soon revealed as niggardly and ultimately as a demon. At first seen as an effective debater who can hold his own with Joseph in quoting Jewish and non-Jewish sources as text proofs, he is ultimately revealed as an utter failure in the final debate with Joseph in his house.

Seen in this context the tale of the eunuch is ironic in more ways than one. The portrait of the all-knowing eunuch is a far cry from that of Enan as finally revealed—a man who falls on his face in a debate and who, without guidance from another, would have married poorly despite his fear of doing precisely that. Secondly, whereas in the included tale, the eunuch (representing Enan) *appears* ludicrous but is revealed as consummately wise—in the frame narrative Enan *appears* very wise and, at first, semi-divine, but is ultimately revealed as unlearned and incompetent and a demon.

Finally it is no small irony that the odd-looking demon, Enan, who has presented himself as human and generous (up to that point in the story), should tell a tale wherein (1) a person of unusual physical appearance (the tall youth in the harem) is revealed as an evildoer, and (2) he, Enan (represented by the eunuch), is ultimately responsible for an evildoer's unmasking.

In providing ironic contrast with the frame, the tale of the eunuch serves a function shared by many other included tales. It is ironic that the three stories of the wise judge who unmasks deceitful men is told by Enan, who successfully conceals his true nature from his traveling companion; and it is doubly ironic that the virtuous host in the city of Tob in his stories should also touch upon the identity of Enan obliquely: in the tale of Tobit, by alluding to a dangerous demon;⁴³ and in his second tale, by reporting on an allegedly saintly man who is revealed to have been a heretic!⁴⁴

And finally it is yet again ironic that Joseph, who had suspected at the start that Enan's appearance bode him no good, should be treated in

43. Davidson (1914, p. 58, l. 90 and p. 59, l. 109); Hadas (1932, pp. 93 and 95).

44. Davidson (1914, p. 61, l. 164—p. 62, l. 168); Schirmann (1956, Bk. II, Part I, p. 28, ll. 53–57); Hadas (1932, p. 98).

every story of the journey, whether told by Enan or the good host of Tob, to descriptions of dissemblers and liars!

5. A Consideration of an Analogue for "The Tale of the Eunuch and the Wise Daughter of a Countryman"

Davidson (1914, pp. LII–LIX) cites an Indian folk tale, recorded from a village narrator in the 19th Century, which bears a striking resemblance to ibn Zabara's story. The questions of the antiquity of the tale and to what extent it, or an earlier version, might have been known to Zabara lie outside the scope of the present enquiry; and an overly detailed presentation and analysis of the tale is not in order, given the fact of the nature of its oral transmission and reporting. Nonetheless, a summary of the tale and a contrast of a number of its main features with "The Tale of the Eunuch" will prove most helpful, particularly in demonstrating the internal logic of the Hebrew version and pointing up again the deliberate design of the author in his choice of characters and plot construction.

The Indian tale begins not with the king's dream, but rather with an incident wherein a fish laughs at the queen. She, vexed, reports the matter to her husband, who commands his wazir to provide an explanation within six months or die. The latter, after five months of vainly exhausting all sources of information, prepares for death and sends his son away until the king's anger should cool. The son, clever and handsome, sets off, falls in with a farmer and in the ensuing conversation puzzles the man with a series of comments and odd behavior akin to the eunuch's in Zabara's tale: the young man offers the peasant a lift; asks whether a field of corn be eaten or not; asks that his companion get two horses with a knife; calls a city a cemetery and a cemetery a city; unlike the peasant, wades across a deep stream without removing his pajamas and shoes; and at the peasant's unsolicited invitation to come to his house, asks first whether the beam is strong. The farmer, thoroughly confused, leaves the young man behind and enters his house, where his daughter unriddles the man's remarks one by one, the peasant accepting each interpretation. The explanations concerning the "lift" and field of corn parallel those of Zabara's tale; the two horses are interpreted as referring to walking sticks; the city whose inhabitants were inhospitable, as the farmer explained, was considered dead, and the cemetery merited the name of city

because they there had encountered charitable people. The pajama-shoe incident is interpreted as prudence and the daughter instructs her father to reply to the beam query by simply stating that the house's beams are adequately strong.

The girl then sends the man, via a servant, a large quantity of food and a message concerning the moon and its fullness, twelve months and the sea; en route the servant meets his son, who partakes of some of the food before it reaches its destination. The young man's reply serves to reveal his discernment of the girl's message as well as the theft of the food—and results in the servant's being punished. The young man soon tells his hosts of his dilemma, which the maiden solves by openly declaring the dream's meaning; namely, that a man is hiding in the king's palace. The young man returns and informs his father, who tells the incredulous king the import of the fish's laughter. To prove the correctness of this interpretation the wazir devises a test that unveils the deceptor. The queen is thus satisfied, and the wazir's son weds the farmer's daughter.

A comparison of the Indian tale with Zabara's reveals a number of significant differences. If in both tales the traveler's odd questions can be seen to relate thematically to the harem intrigue at the palace (conceivably even the city/cemetery confusion could relate obliquely to things not being seen for what they really are); and if in both, the maiden's counter-gambit closely mirrors at least one of the traveler's observations—only in Zabara's story is this display of wit so thoroughly balanced and presented as an exercise of equals. As noted before, the maiden uses her own father, an ignorant medium, in revealing her sagacity to the eunuch, as he did to her. And in the Zabara tale the wisdom of the maiden is further accentuated by her recounting the riddles en masse in the order recited by the eunuch, even though her father had changed that order.

The male protagonists of the two tales differ substantially. It has been demonstrated that ample evidence exists in the Zabara tale for the reader's assuming that the eunuch himself knew all along the interpretation of the troublesome dream. In the Indian tale the wazir clearly cannot explain the meaning of the fish incident, nor does his son seem to know how. Indeed if it be suggested that the son did know and was engaged in a search similar to the eunuch's, the ending of the tale, where the son and not the maiden gives the wazir the correct information, who relays the same to the king, belies such a hypothesis: there would have been no need

whatever for the son to have journeyed forth in the first place.

The ignorance of the peasant is more pronounced in the Hebrew version. Unlike his Indian counterpart, he does not murmur agreement at every interpretation his daughter provides for the visitor's peculiar remarks; to the contrary, his second assertion that their guest is a simpleton, following the latter's comments on the food, shows that the peasant was not convinced by his daughter's earlier interpretation and assessment of the visitor.

Both the above differences—the Hebrew tale's having the eunuch possessed of greater wisdom and the peasant of greater obtuseness—not only are part of the elaborate intellectual game of the eunuch and the girl, but relate to the tale's function within *Sepher Shaashuim*: Enan, it will be recalled—in response to Joseph's earlier provocations (explicit and through his fox-leopard tales)—is out to mirror his own brilliance in the eunuch and Joseph's obtuseness in the peasant.

The fact of the king's messenger being a eunuch in the Hebrew version is also crucial: otherwise the logic of the tale would lead to the messenger's wedding, himself, the peasant's daughter—precisely what takes place in the Indian version.

Finally, as has been noted by Davidson (1914, p. LIX), "Indian tales as a rule delight in absurdities." The number of incidents in the Hebrew not demonstrably motivated by the characters' plans or interests are few indeed: the major question that can be debated is whether or not prescience can be attributed to (1) the eunuch in seeking out the particular peasant to whom he attached himself and to (2) the girl, in properly rearranging the sequence of the eunuch's remarks. The other details of the story can be seen as deriving from, or relating to, the eunuch's need to find a suitable person to tell the king what he, the eunuch, already knew. In the Indian tale there are more impossibilities or improbabilities: the talking fish; the young man's chancing upon the father of a maiden who will save the day; the chancing of the servant's son upon his father en route with food, and his eating thereof—for had this not occurred, no response would have been called for by the young guest; and the episode of the wazir-devised test is less than convincing he has a pit dug, over which all harem concubines must jump; the only successful jumper is the man. But what man in such a circumstance would so baldly have given himself away by succeeding?

Finally, if in the context of the Indian tale the wazir is not seen as taking any risk in directly telling the king the embarrassing truth, still the

presentation by Zabara seems to more closely capture the intrigue and *savoir-faire* of court life than is the case in the Indian analogue.

In sum, a comparison of Joseph ibn Zabara's "The Tale of the Eunuch" with an analogous story from India augments the conclusion derived heretofore: the author has, in this tale, provided the reader with a narrative gem—an organic literary piece whose almost every incident is well motivated and whose characters' conflicts and intricate interactions not only play off one against the other, but illumine and carry forward the relationship of the two protagonists of the work as a whole: the devil Enan and the first person narrator, Joseph ibn Zabara himself.

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